

# Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

*Protects and Maximizes Our National Investment in Early Care and Education*

## What Is Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC)?

ECMHC is an intervention that teams a mental health professional with early childhood professionals to improve the social, emotional and behavioral health of children in child care and early education programs. Through the development of partnerships among teachers and parents, ECMHC builds their capacity to understand the influence of their relationships and interactions on young children's development.

Children's well-being is improved and mental health problems are prevented as a result of the Consultant's work with the teachers, directors and parents through skilled observations, individualized strategies, and early identification of children with challenging behavior which places them at risk for expulsion.

Mental Health Consultants provide **three types of services**, often concurrently:

### Child-Focused Consultation

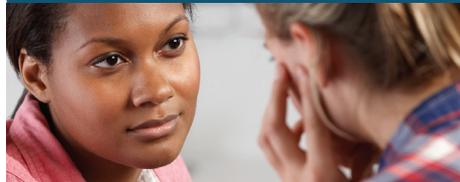


When a specific child's behavior is of concern to parents or teachers, the Consultant helps these adults understand, assess and address the child's needs by developing an individualized plan with the parents and teachers.



*Julie is a toddler enrolled in child care. Julie's mother recently had a new baby and is suffering from post-partum depression. Julie's father travels for business and has been away often. Julie has been having a hard time at child care: she is very sad, clingy and withdrawn from activities she usually enjoys. The Consultant works with her family and teacher to develop a plan to help Julie manage her emotions and behavior.*

### Classroom-Focused Consultation



The Consultant also works with teachers to improve the care offered to all children in their classroom by helping to identify attitudes, beliefs, practices and conditions that may be undermining quality relationships between teachers and children.



*Ms. Rice is a child care teacher. Lately, her mother has had been hospitalized, and she is juggling care for two sons. She notices the children in her classroom mirroring her irritable tone and behavior. The Consultant helps her: practice self-care techniques throughout the day, ask for help when she feels overwhelmed, and connect with mental health services.*

### Program-Focused Consultation



Directors and other program leaders are supported by the Consultant to make changes in their child care practices and/or policies to the benefit of all of the children and adults in their setting.



*The Director of Building Blocks Child Care was struggling to deal with the biting issues in both of her toddler rooms. Several parents threatened to withdraw their children if the toddlers who bit were not expelled. The Consultant helped the director and staff develop a policy outlining steps for supporting all children, including those that bite. The Consultant helped the Director prepare for a parent meeting and facilitated some of the dialogue around parent's concerns and fears.*

ECMHC programs are integrated within their communities. Consultants often serve as a social and emotional resource to community partners, provide trainings on social emotional topics, and connect families and early care and education providers to other services and supports.

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# The Need for ECMHC

The positive impact of ECMHC on children and families, teachers and child care programs has been well established in large-scale evaluations in many states. Findings from rigorous studies (i.e., random-controlled experiments, quasi-experimental and mixed methods studies) underscore that access to ECMHC reduces serious problems that undermine school readiness in American children.<sup>1,14</sup>



## THE PROBLEMS

- Of the **11 million children** in out of home care, **more than half** are in **poor quality care**, decreasing their odds of school readiness.<sup>2,13</sup>
- **10-20% of young children** in child care **have serious problems** with **emotions and behavior** and many more children have lower levels of challenging behaviors that compromise their ability to learn and reduce the teacher's ability to teach the other children<sup>5,6</sup>
- **Preschool expulsion rates are 3.5 times** the rate of students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. Boys and children of color are disproportionately impacted<sup>7,11</sup>
- **Families** with children at risk for expulsion **often miss work** due to problems in child care<sup>18</sup>
- **25-35% of teachers** report high levels of **job stress and burnout**<sup>19</sup>—which predict higher rates of child expulsion and staff turnover

## ECMHC RESEARCH/EVALUATION FINDINGS

- **Improvements in teacher-child interactions**<sup>1,3,4,5</sup>—the aspect of quality care most closely linked to improved child outcomes.<sup>10,13</sup> Several states have reported **improved quality of classroom climate** (e.g., CLASS scores in Emotional Support domain) associated with ECMHC.<sup>1,5,12</sup>
- **Reductions** in children's **problem behavior** and **increases** in their **social skills**<sup>4,5,8,9,14,15,16,17,18</sup>
- **Prevention of expulsion**, including among young children of color<sup>5,7,8,9,15,16,17,18</sup>
- **Families missed less work** and had lower parenting stress after ECMHC.<sup>18</sup> Improved parent-provider communication and collaboration<sup>9</sup>
- **Decreases in teachers' stress** and **lower rates of turnover** associated with ECMHC.<sup>1,3,5</sup>

## Who Provides ECMHC?

ECMH consultants, at a minimum:

- Have a **Master's degree** in mental health
- Are **licensed or license-eligible** and well-trained in their field
- Have at least **2-3 years** of work **experience** as a mental health professional
- Possess **attributes and skills** critical to this work (e.g., facilitate partnerships, culturally sensitive, flexible, empathetic, and curious)
- Have **specialized knowledge** (e.g., knowledge of early care and education systems, consultation, and child development; an understanding of the impacts of stressors on child development and mental health, and understanding of how domestic and community violence can impact mental well-being; the relationship between adult mental illness and infant social and emotional development).

## References

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